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SUBJECT: MUSLIM COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE TO LONDON BOMBINGS
STIRS CONTROVERSY

REF: PERTH 95

Classified By: Political Counselor Woo Lee for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The London terrorist incidents of July 7 and 21 have sparked a debate in Australia about the value and meaning of multiculturalism and about the need for the Muslim community to condemn more forthrightly violent extremist propaganda within its own ranks. Australia's relatively small Islamic community of around 300,000 has been outspoken in the media about its views, both in support of and in protest against extremist behavior. Several Muslim leaders have made controversial public statements asserting Osama bin Laden's greatness and seeking to vindicate Muslims who use extreme methods in (alleged) defense of their religion. PM Howard has strongly denounced such statements, as have some Muslim organizations. Even many "moderate" Australian Muslims, however, while renouncing violence, appear to blame the West for bringing terrorism upon itself. END SUMMARY.

EXTREMIST STATEMENTS FROM SOME MUSLIM LEADERS

12. (SBU) Following the London bombings, a handful of Australian Muslim clerics ignited a storm of controversy when they asserted in the media that Muslims were not to blame for the bombings and that, in any case, this form of violent jihad was justified. Sheikh Mohammed Omran, imam of a Melbourne mosque, claimed in a July 11 television interview that Osama bin Laden was a "great man" and that he did not believe that bin Laden or any Muslim had been responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. or the July attacks on London. In yet another interview, Omran asserted that the mastermind behind 9/11 and the London bombings was "100%... from the U.S. government." Meanwhile, Abdul Nacer Benbrika, also known as Abu Bakr, an Algerian-born Muslim cleric whose Australian passport was revoked earlier this year, told the press that he also considered bin Laden a great man, that Islam did not tolerate other religions, and that violent jihad was a part of Islam which vindicated anyone who fought for the sake of Allah. Benbrika said he thought that it would be a "very bad" idea to compel Muslims in Australia to respect other religions. He believed that Islamic law and Australian law were two distinct, mutually exclusive codes and that, for Muslims, Islamic law trumped all other doctrine and allowed them to break Australian laws if need be in the practice of their religion. According to the Australian press, a small number of Benbrika's students have attended terrorist training camps in central Asia. Benbrika stated in one interview that he would be betraying Islam if he were to instruct such students not to train or engage in violence.

13. (SBU) Both Omran and Benbrika claimed that Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) officials interviewed them frequently. The press reported that ASIO had raided Benbrika's home during a June operation and revoked his passport on the grounds that he was likely to threaten the security of Australia or a foreign country if he went overseas. The media also reported on a liaison program ASIO had with leaders in the Muslim community to encourage Islamic leaders to dissuade young Muslims in Australia from engaging in terrorist activity, in addition to providing the agency with information on extremism in the community.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: EXTREMIST SPEECH "UNACCEPTABLE"

14. (SBU) In the days following the July 7 attacks, PM Howard challenged Australia's Muslim leaders to speak out in their communities to condemn terrorism and extremism in their midst, noting that the London bombers had been British-born Muslims. He called the statements by radical Muslim clerics in Australia "appalling" and "utterly unacceptable to the overwhelming majority of Australians." In a July 29 radio interview, the PM said he personally believed that immigrants to Australia should "overwhelmingly seek to become an Australian...not abandoning in any way the heritage they have from another land, but they should imbibe Australian values and Australian beliefs." Islamic community leaders had an obligation to "strenuously oppose both broadly and within their own communities expressions of support for terrorist behavior." Winning the fight against terrorism, the PM said, required strong counterterrorism laws and good intelligence services. But it also entailed excluding from Australia people who might pose a threat, having a society where no

group was impenetrable, and putting an obligation on community leaders to "oppose, criticize, and disassociate" themselves from terrorist attitudes.

15. (SBU) Attorney-General Ruddock joined the debate, saying the Government would look into whether incendiary literature sold in Islamic bookstores in Sydney and Melbourne breached anti-terrorism laws by promoting jihad and justifying suicide bombings. The inter-faith Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims, and Jews issued a statement on July 22, following Ruddock's announcement, calling on the owners of the bookshops in Sydney and Melbourne to withdraw hate literature and "apologize for diminishing the culture of respect" in Australia. The organization comprises the National Council of Churches in Australia, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC), and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. The statement continued, "All fair-minded people will be dismayed to learn that notorious racist and vilifying texts printed overseas have found their way to Australia and have been made available for sale at bookshops patronized by customers seeking knowledge of Islam and Muslim life."

MUSLIM MODERATES RESPOND TO CONTROVERSIAL STATEMENTS

16. (SBU) Clearly concerned with the damage being done to the image of the entire Australian Muslim community by Omran and Benbrika, on July 26 the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) sent letters to 200 Muslim clerics and community leaders calling on them to condemn terrorism and acknowledge that Muslims had been involved in attacks such as September 11. The letter appealed to all Muslims "to disown and denounce terrorism and violence in no uncertain terms... to act and to win back the hearts and minds of (Muslim) youth, and to continue the ongoing efforts to build a culture of peace and harmony in Australia." It quoted a verse from the Qur'an that "to take an innocent life is as if you have taken the lives of the whole of humanity ... and to save one life is as if you have saved the whole of humanity." Nonetheless, the letter also subtly attempted to validate the reasons behind the increasing radicalization of young Muslims: "The Muslim youth is no longer an ignorant group and is well aware of the global politics that has (sic) been taking place for the past fifty years."

MIXED ATTITUDES EVEN AMONG "MODERATES"

17. (C) On August 1, we met with the President of the Islamic Society of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Mohammed Berjaoui, to hear his views on the extremist statements recently publicized. The Islamic Society is one of the Islamic councils under the umbrella of AFIC. Berjaoui claimed that most Muslims thought extremist clerics such as Omran and Benbrika were "idiots." He said they had no credibility in the Muslim community and that the media should ignore the more sensationalist statements and focus on the positive comments from Muslims such as AFIC's July 26 condemnation of terrorism. Berjaoui noted that his own organization had held a media event on July 26 to condemn terrorism, following AFIC's request. He also believed, however, that U.S. involvement in Iraq had put America and its allies at greater risk for terrorist attacks and he blamed the U.S. alliance with Israel for many of the attacks the U.S. suffered in Iraq and elsewhere. He argued that 9/11 had been the fault of the U.S. insofar as it had trained Osama bin Laden to fight in Afghanistan in the 1980s, a sentiment also expressed by Sheikh Omran who claimed that "the West made (bin Laden) what he is."

18. (C) The President of AFIC, Dr. Ameer Ali, recently stated that he wanted all of Australia's twenty-three Islamic secondary schools registered by AFIC in order to "maintain standards." In an August 8 conversation in Perth, Ali told us that he wanted the GOA to give AFIC the power to grant authority to imams to teach Islam and to approve the visits of foreign imams, and that the time had come for Australia, like France, to train its own Muslim clergy. Most of Australia's imams were foreign born and trained, Ali said, and had "no idea" how to live in Western society. Ali hoped to gain GOA support for his ideas at the Prime Minister's upcoming summit with Islamic leaders (septel). (Comment: Not surprisingly, given Ali's views on the need for AFIC control, some in Australia's Muslim community have criticized his proposals as a power grab. Even if well-intentioned, however, without the power of the GOA behind it, AFIC probably would not have the authority to implement its plan. Reflecting Islam's lack of hierarchy, at this time AFIC is effectively a loosely organized body of Islamic councils across the country. The Islamic Society of the ACT's Berjaoui told us AFIC had "no input into (his) work." AFIC could issue advisory statements, but member councils were not obliged to follow them. End comment.)

DEBATE EXTENDS TO MULTICULTURALISM

19. (C) In the wake of the UK bombings and the extremist statements by some Australian clerics, the media has begun to

debate the viability of multiculturalism in Australia and whether it was inadvertently culpable for extremist thinking.

One journalist asserted that a big problem for Australian multiculturalism was that it "failed to anticipate that immigrants might one day be opposed to the central tenets of Western society." In discussing how young Australian Muslims reconciled their faith with growing up in Western society, a Muslim journalist wrote in "The Age" newspaper, "Torn between trying to respect their parent's cultural norms and being attracted to freedoms enjoyed by their peers, the resulting internal turmoil is a constant riot in the head." Some editorials argued that Australia's increasingly multicultural society allowed space for terrorists to disseminate their radical ideas. Others responded that tolerance should not become a casualty of Australia's CT policies and that multiculturalism cannot be a scapegoat for all the views that Australians dislike. This latter view, however, has distinctly been on the defensive in the wake of the July bombings.

PROFILE OF MUSLIMS IN AUSTRALIA

10. (U) The most recent Australian Census in 2001 listed 281,576 Muslims in Australia, an increase of forty percent in five years. There are now Muslim communities in all Australian States and Territories, with the largest population in Sydney, followed by Melbourne. More than one-third of Australian Muslims are born in Australia. Australia's Muslim community is drawn from more than seventy different countries. The Census also reported that Arabic is the fifth most commonly spoken language in Australia.

COMMENT

11. (C) Some Muslim clerics in Australia have been publicly promoting extremist ideas for years without provoking a public outcry. The London bombings and the GOA's aggressive response in reevaluating Australia's counterterrorism posture have awakened the Australian public to the threat of domestic Muslim extremism. Australia's Islamic community may only number around 300,000, but its vocal leaders and their agendas are now being more closely monitored by the Australian intelligence services, the media, and the general public. While Muslim moderates have publicly opposed extremist statements, privately, their views are more complicated and may even share aspects of the anti-Western ideology that breeds terrorism. The fact that AFIC, Australia's largest and arguably most influential national Islamic body, views many Western policies as "attacks on Muslims" indicates that Australia still has a long way to go in explaining the West to its Muslim community.

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